

To Ms. Gonzalez,

I am writing to you in the hopes that you will publish my op-ed, *Your Choice in 2020: the California Criminal Sentencing, Parole, and DNA Collection Initiative*. The California Criminal Sentencing, Parole, and DNA Collection Initiative has is up for election in 2020. As the law is currently written, people are shocked to learn what constitutes a violent crime and what does not. This proposition will affect you, me, and countless other San Diego residents by changing criminal sentencing laws and shifting funding and responsibility of the penal system between the state and our county government. My op-ed argues that Californians should vote to pass this initiative in 2020.

This is a public policy issue that will improve the lives of many San Diegans, especially those in communities most affected by crime with the least say on the issue. As a lifetime San Diego resident and college student pursuing public policy, I would like to respectfully ask that you publish my op-ed on this bipartisan proposal.

Sincerely,

Jerod Sun

## **Your Choice in 2020: the California Criminal Sentencing, Parole, and DNA Collection Initiative**

*For submission to the San Diego Union-Tribune*

Walking down Broadway Avenue on the way to work one day, I stopped by the scene of a shoplifting arrest and thanked the officers on duty. As I left, one of the officers quipped, “we’ll see him again next week once the judge gives him his umpteenth chance.” Unfortunately, he was probably right.

What is the state of criminal justice reform in California? Many are surprised to hear where the line is drawn between violent and nonviolent crimes. State Rep. Jim Cooper (D-Elk Grove) [puts it succinctly](#): the laws, as they are currently constituted, consider “drugging and raping somebody, raping a developmentally disabled person, spousal abuse, a drive-by shooting, human trafficking of a child,” to be “nonviolent crimes.”

Not if The [California Criminal Sentencing, Parole, and DNA Collection Initiative](#) were to pass in 2020.

A conversation on criminal justice and sentencing can often turn antagonistic. But common-sense reforms don’t have to be contentious. This initiative is one of such – a proposal garnering broad bipartisan support, backed by [Rep. Vince Fong \(R-Bakersfield\)](#) and [Rep. Jim Cooper \(D-Elk Grove\)](#) in the state assembly.

What are the terms of the initiative? This initiative calls for an expansion of the offenses that restrict convicted criminals for parole programs. No longer will violent crimes like the ones Rep. Cooper described be eligible for early parole. Certain types of theft and fraud will be categorized as misdemeanors or felonies to be in line with the consensus standard. Repeat offenders will no longer be streamlined into a “catch-and-release” program. The most egregious violations will require those convicted to submit DNA samples to the state database.

It's not hard to see why such proposals have garnered broad bipartisan support. Law enforcement agrees, as seen by the support from the [Association for Los Angeles Deputy Sheriffs](#) and the Peace Officers Research Association of California.

There is but one impediment to this proposal’s passage. The governor is reflexively opposing this measure as it contradicts his past political positions. Failed and dangerous policy decisions should not be kept for the sake of a political legacy.

The main argument the no camp points to focuses on prison overpopulation and budget shortfalls. Ostensibly, releasing convicted criminals early is the right choice for Californians as a smart cost-cutting measure. However, we simply didn't provide adequate capacity for what should've been expected. While prison overpopulation is a significant problem, [California is at](#)

[the low end of incarceration rates](#). Indeed, a Supreme Court order to normalize prison capacity has resulted in the laws being relaxed to reduce the sentences of people convicted of all but the most serious crimes. Supporters proudly proclaim that the prison population has significantly decreased. But pointing to a statistic that says we have fewer criminals in prison ignores the real question affecting Californians - do we have less people committing crimes?

Sadly, [that's not the case](#). But there are solutions to solve the root cause of the problem, and these are the ones that we should be talking about.

We should provide services to convicted felons in order to lower recidivism rates. By investing in organizations committed to lowering recidivism rates, we can give job training, mental health counseling, and substance abuse support to repeat offenders of nonviolent crimes. Nobody wants to be - or should be - a career prisoner, but we should not be giving passes in a country that respects the rule of law.

As this is how things stand, others argue that we should wait for the legislature to consider this issue. The last legislative bill relevant to the situation, [AB 109](#) in 2011, simply delegated discretion from state to county governments for misdemeanors.

The lethargic inertia in Sacramento is the very reason why frustrated citizens organized this ballot initiative to put the question directly to the people: do we want safer streets and appropriate sentencing, or do we want to cut corners to save a few million dollars, hardly a drop in the bucket of California's [142.7 Billion FY 2019 budget](#)?

This initiative ensures that violent criminals are not released early due to technicalities and archaic interpretations of state law. Please take a constructive step in criminal justice reform and vote yes for the California Criminal Sentencing, Parole, and DNA Collection Initiative on November 3, 2020.